

Sweetwater seeing ‘green’

New distribution center and headquarters will be certified in environmental design

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Sweetwater Sound will be a “LEEDer” in environmental design when it opens its new facility on the former North American Van Lines campus on U.S. 30 West.

The company, which sells professional recording and music equipment, recently broke ground on its new headquarters, which is part of a 150,000-square-foot facility. The building – in fact, the entire campus – will be unique to the region in that it will be LEED-certified. LEED stands for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design, a program developed by the U.S. Green Building Council promoting facilities designed to be energy-efficient and good for the environment, while at the same time being economical.

Sweetwater Sound will have to pay between \$100,000 to \$150,000 to get the LEED certification, said Jerry Noble, project architect for **MSKTD & Associates Inc.**, the architectural firm designing the building. “It does cost more money,” said John Hopkins, vice president of operations for Sweetwater. “We feel like we will recoup the investment both in energy savings and in productivity gained. I think we would do it even if we weren’t sure the investment could be recouped.” Hopkins said Sweetwater founder and CEO Chuck Surack has had a longstanding commitment to conservation. “We just feel like it’s the right thing to do,” Hopkins said. “We’ve always been very environmentally friendly.” The “green” building concepts extend beyond just the building. “It’s a comprehensive plan to look at the entire site,” Hopkins said.

LEED certification requires looking at every aspect of a facility. Goals include using recycled materials in construction, conserving water, building an energy-efficient facility, using natural light where possible, and keeping the interior air healthy for workers and customers.

The Green Building Council has established several levels of LEED certification. Sweetwater is seeking the second-highest level, Noble said. The plan also encourages employees to be environmentally aware. For example, those who drive fuel-efficient cars will get priority parking spaces, Hopkins said. Even the restrooms will be different. Hopkins said the facility will use waterless urinals made by Kohler that are expected to save thousands of gallons of water a year. “Supposedly, they work great,” Hopkins said. The goal is to get a 20 percent reduction in water usage, Noble said. Landscaping will be chosen carefully so irrigation can be limited.

A portion of the building will be illuminated with natural light, and sensors will automatically dim or brighten interior lights. Noble said the presence of natural light will save energy, and should have a positive effect on employees’ moods.

Low-emitting materials – in other words, products with less of a chemical smell – will be chosen for interior surfaces, such as furniture, carpets and upholstery. It should be a better environment for people who are sensitive to such smells and emissions.

“It will be a much healthier building for people to work in,” Noble said.

Sweetwater officials hope healthier working conditions will lead to greater productivity, and hope the money the company saves in energy costs eventually will pay for the LEED certification. Hopkins said Sweetwater officials realized they could build a “green” facility without LEED certification, but being certified “kind of puts our money where our mouth is.”

